

Turtle Tips #3 – Food & Cooking

Overview: This Turtle Tip will deal with food and associated issues. It will deal with menus and recipes only in passing.

The text of these Turtle Tips and associated lists will be posted on the District Web Site (<http://www.scouters.org/buckeye.htm>) shortly after they are delivered.

How Much: For backpacking trips of a few days to a couple of weeks, the key issue will be getting enough calories to meet the energy needs of hikers. For Scouts and adults, you should plan on 3000 to 3500 calories per day. Extreme hiking involving heavy climbing or very cold temperatures may require additional calories. If you have a reasonable mix of foods with whole grains and a good assortment of dried vegetables, you should be able to provide a reasonably balanced diet.

Note: there will usually be a few scouts who seem to be bottomless pits. They will continue to eat almost without end. You do not need to fill them up! If they get the 3000 to 3500 calories, they will do just fine.

The key question is how does this translate into actual food that you need to pack. Here are some rules of the thumb. Protein and carbohydrates are about 100 calories per ounce (dry weight). Fats and oils provide about 200 calories per ounce.

For weight efficiency, it is obvious that the ideal diet is a bit over a pound of lard per day. Aside from health issues, most people will find that they can manage only a limited amount of fat. However, if you can add fat or oil to a recipe and have it still taste good, it will provide more energy for the same weight. I always include a bottle of "Squeeze Parkay" and squirt it into most stews and sauces.

With a reasonable mix of fat, protein, and carbohydrates, you will need a bit more than two pounds of dry food per day per hiker (less trail snacks). While I usually select the amount of food based on the number of meals and planned menus, I always weigh the food before I go and make adjustments if the total weight is significantly out of this range.

Breakfast: Always a problem. In most cases you will want to get started quickly in the morning so you are able to get most of your hiking done before the heat of the day catches up with you. Over the years I have found that a package or two of instant cereal (oatmeal, cream of wheat, grits, etc.) made up with hot water, a hot drink (cocoa, instant coffee, tea, etc.) along with some dried fruit that has rehydrated overnight makes a quick meal that will get you started. I often include some pastries like pop tarts that get eaten at the first break.

Sometimes I plan for a slow morning or two if the weather permits. Pancakes make a nice treat but take a long time to feed a large group. They are nice to break out on a rainy morning that you are trying to wait out before starting.

I find that it is very difficult to get inexperienced hikers to get their act together and get moving in the morning. It seems to take lots of prodding to get them out of bed, dressed, tent packed, etc. I found that one simple rule got things moving. "No food until your tent is on your pack." I put some fruit in water the night before to rehydrate. As soon as I am up, I start some water boiling and get out the food bag with breakfast. When they are ready, they can eat.

Safety rules: If a backpacking stove is cooking on a table, no one can sit at the table. Also, never pour hot water into a cup that someone is holding. Put it down and then pour into it. Boiling water is always a serious danger. It is doubly so when you are a day or two from a hospital. The best first aid is no accident in the first place.

Trail Snacks: You need to plan on trail snacks to be a quarter to a third of the calories. Most hikers find that they need to keep stuffing in calories every hour or two all the time that they are hiking. I make trail snacks the responsibility of each hiker. I require that every hiker bring about 12 ounces of trail snacks per day of hiking (not including lunches). (Also adjust your overall food weight to include the trail snacks.)

The snacks can be anything that is dry and can take pounding around in a pack. Nuts, candies, dried fruits, pop tarts, jerky, etc will work. However, I always tell the scouts how much to bring depending on the number of days to be hiked. It is important to weigh the trail snacks for each hiker (including adults) before starting. Extra must be left behind or shared with those who do not have enough. Shortages must be made up before starting. Avoid moist foods (extra weight and spoilage), low density foods (popped popcorn), and fragile foods (potato chips).

When you stop for breaks, make sure that all hikers eat trail snacks and drink water. This is not optional! Hikers that fail to eat and drink enough get tired, hike slower and get depressed from the dehydration and low blood sugar levels. This happens quite quickly (in only an hour or two) and is quite noticeable. Watch for it and fix it when you see it.

Lunch: There are two schools on the lunch issue. Some only take a longer break and eat more trail snacks. Others have some sort of lunch. I tend to go with the more formal lunch route. I find that bread, cheese, and meat (fully cured trail sausage) make up many of my lunches. The small loaves of party rye or wheat seem to stand up to the pack and taste good. If the group is very tired and you need to get them pumped up for a number of more miles, a hot soup goes a long way. The dried soups from Knors seem to go down easy. Make sure you use a mix with some weight (calories). You will need to adjust the trail snacks requirement depending on the way you plan lunch.

Dinner: Dinner is the major meal of the day. For me, it is almost always a starch and a sauce. The starch can be pasta, rice, potatoes, bulgur (cracked cooked wheat), beans, etc. The sauce usually has some meat and can be spaghetti sauce, stroganoff, curry, etc. I often use small tins of canned meat or dried meat as the start of the sauce (the extra weight is minor because you don't use much). One recommendation, after cooking always mix the sauce with the starch. Otherwise, the sauce will be used up long before all of the starch is eaten.

Warning, if you plan to use packaged freeze dried meals, go by weight (or total calories) to determine how much you will need. Do not go by the "serves ..." on the package. You will usually find that they are very expensive and do not provide the necessary calories unless you double up on the portions (which makes them more expensive.)

Ideas: There are many recipe books for backpacking. However, I recommend that you start by just wandering through the grocery store with an open mind. You will find that many of the prepackaged one pot meals will provide the basic dried foods that you need to build a meal. Instead of ground beef or chicken, try adding dried beef (after washing) or canned chicken. Potatoes au gratin provide sliced dried potatoes that make a great (heavy) meal when rehydrated and fried with sliced dry salami.

Always get rid of the extra packaging and package in plastic bags before starting. One of the Seal-a-Meal sealers will seal food in the associated bags nicely. Zip lock bags are also good but they let oxygen and moisture into the food so they aren't good for long term storage.

Dry Your Own: A food drier makes a great investment if you are preparing many backpacking meals. I find that I can dry fruits (fresh peaches, canned pineapple, etc) and vegetables (frozen vegetables dry great). I sometimes also cook a big pot of chili and spread it on plastic wrap and dry it. (Warning, anything with meat should be handled carefully. I always freeze it after drying and serve it early in the trip.)

Traditions: If you backpack often with the same people, you will find favorite dishes and traditions. For us it was curried chicken on rice with all the condiments for the last supper on the trail. We also had 'clean out the bottom of the pack' stew/soup on the last day. Encourage and enjoy traditions. They build the group and bring Scouts back.

Found Food: On most of the long trips that I have lead, we find apples or berries. If you expect to find fruit along the way, bring some extra sugar to use to make applesauce or berry jam. These are fun and add interest to the trip. If you hike in the late summer, you will almost always find something good.

Bread: One of things that I find that I miss is bread. There are some solutions. The party breads make good lunches. Also, cornbread can be fried as cakes while the rest of the supper is cooking (johnny cakes).